

## **Radio and popular journalism in Britain: Early radio critics and radio criticism**

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores the way British radio critics began to write about radio in the national press during the 1920s and the early 1930s. I will argue that the way radio came to be covered at this time was a result of the way critics were situated in relation to the needs of and interactions between broadcasters, the press and the existing dominant cultural hierarchy of the time. In response to such tensions many critics began to adapt existing forms of coverage associated with theatre, film and book reviewing to this new aural medium, approaches already known to the editors, the public and themselves. Because of this, most critics came to focus on radio programmes as the text to critique and write about, using a form of impressionism. Others, however, began to create a more contextual approach, writing about radio more as a mass medium, created by broadcasting organizations such as the BBC. As this coverage began to appear in the national newspapers it came to play an important role in the way radio became accepted as part of popular culture.*

### **Keywords**

critics

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## **Introduction**

While a popular part of newspaper provision, there has been a woeful lack of work on or interest in the work of British radio and television critics, with a few exceptions mostly focusing on television critics (Poole 1984; Fiske 1994; Ellis 2008; Rixon 2011). In some ways this form of journalistic-critical writing has not been seen as interesting or as vital for broadcast scholars as the institutions of broadcasting (e.g. Burns 1977), their output (e.g. Cooke 2003), associated policy (e.g. Goodwin 1998) or the consumption by audiences (e.g. Morley 1986). Where such scholars have touched on such coverage it has mostly been limited in nature and often only used to provide an historical context to debates about broadcasting rather than as the main focus of the work (e.g. Briggs 1965: 23–24, 70–71). The same can be said of those whose work and focus is associated with journalism studies. They equally tend to sideline such output, treating it as superficial compared to serious news coverage and more to do with those working in the field of radio or television studies, though again, there are exceptions (e.g. Ellis 2008: 244–52). However, as I shall argue, broadcast critics are an important part of the mediated public discourse about television and radio, helping to coalesce public opinion, providing a shared way for understanding and talking about such media and, importantly, playing a role in how such media have become accepted into an existing cultural context and hierarchy. Their works tell us something about the way

we, the public, make sense of such a cultural form. And it is for these reasons, I would argue, that more research is required on the role of radio critics at this time.

In this article I will explore how the early coverage of radio developed in the British national press of the 1920s and 1930s and the way the early correspondents and critics wrote about this medium helping it to become established as part of popular culture. The coverage of this period tells us something of the cultural tensions that surrounded radio: tensions arising from the press, who saw this new medium as a new form of competition (Briggs 1961: 172–73; Scannell and Cardiff 1991: 6; Williams 2010: 152); from the British Broadcasting Company and later the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), who were wary about press coverage of their activities (Moseley 1935: 66–67); and from the cultural elite, who saw radio and the mass media more generally as threatening dominant cultural values (Carey 1992). Critics had to find a way to work with such pressures as they sought acceptance for radio, and indeed, their own roles. Also, as I shall argue, the way they came to cover radio at this time laid down a precedent for how television would be treated by the press when its popularity took off in the 1950s. Indeed, if one looks at how the current multichannel provision is now written about online, in listings magazines and newspapers, one can see that this is still recognizably the same as the coverage that developed in the 1920s and 1930s (Rixon 2011: 163–230).

### **The role of the media critic**

Before I move on to explore how radio press criticism developed in the 1920s and 1930s, I first want to elucidate the role of the critic in the era of the mass media. Cultural critics, it has been argued, play an important role helping to maintain, create and construct a shared cultural view of the world (McDonald 2007: 1–2). This they usually do by critiquing a particular cultural activity or cultural artefact, though some might also take aim at the wider culture,

values, beliefs and the like. While critics often purport to be independently minded, tapping into universal values, many argue that the professional media critic is embedded within a hierarchy of taste and class values and is constrained by particular industrial discourses (Corner 2013; Eagleton 1987; Poole 1984; Rixon 2011). In this way critics and their output must be understood as existing within a particular cultural landscape or field where certain values and associated groups are in dominance. For example, newspaper editors will appoint critics who are aligned to their own and reader's values, which usually reflect the wider cultural norms of society. They appoint critics they know will write about art and culture in a way which readers recognize and appreciate. Critics are, as Giddings (1994: 16) points out, not just there to look critically at the work in question and to provide some sort of judgement, but are employed by the newspaper to attract readers by writing attractive and popular copy. Those that try to offer a too subversive or extreme viewpoint, which might alienate readers could find such appointments difficult to gain and keep. Though, for some, a critic who pushes boundaries is doing exactly what a good critic should (McDonald 2007: 9–12).

However, our understanding of critics should not be reduced to seeing them as mere ciphers of their position in the cultural hierarchy or industrial discourses; some are, at certain moments, able to produce new, possibly subversive, observations that are not, and can never really be, fully inscribed in the forces at work around them (Rixon 2011). This space of active interpretation, though arguably still constrained, is particularly important and prevalent for critics as they reflect on and write about new and developing cultural forms. At such a moment the critic has to create a way of understanding and valuing such new developments, making sense of them for the public. This they might do by pulling from and adapting existing approaches that they, and possibly the public, are well-versed in and which they combined with new ideas in a form of synthesis, leading to a new understanding. This process often happens against the backdrop of wider social, cultural and political

developments that have led to or are part of the reason for the appearance of a new cultural form. For example, Eagleton (1987) argues that critics working in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at a time of immense cultural, political and social change, helped the emergent middle class to become aware of the new developments happening in the arts, theatre and writing, and by dint of this aided in the creation of their own emerging cultural identity.

This idea, of how critics and their output play an important role in how a new medium is received, will inform the way I will explore the role of critics and their coverage in the cultural acceptance of radio. To undertake this task I have analysed examples of press coverage from the 1920s to the mid-1930s from a range of national newspapers, including the *Manchester Guardian*, *The Times*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mirror*. Whilst I also refer to radio journals such as *Popular Wireless* and *Amateur Wireless*, and to the BBC's publication *Radio Times*, I have focused on national newspapers as this is where the majority of people were reading about radio in the 1920s and the early 1930s. While the daily sales of all the British newspapers were approaching ten million by 1930 (Curran et al. 1987: 29), the weekly sales of the *Radio Times* were still only around 851,657 in 1927, though growing (Briggs 1965: 281). One journal that was to become influential in helping to develop radio criticism over the following decades was the BBC journal *The Listener*. I only touch on this fleetly here, because at the time it only had a small, but admittedly influential readership, standing at 27,773 in 1927 (Briggs 1965: 281). Also, as Briggs notes, radio criticism did not become properly embedded in the journal until 'Grace Wyndham Goldie's appointment as radio drama critic in April 1935' (1965: 291). For these reasons this article will focus, mostly, on the development of radio coverage found within the daily newspapers. Throughout the analysis I will seek to identify the changing form taken by such coverage, the

underlying values at work and the role such work played in positioning radio as a form of popular culture.

### **Early press coverage: Technical and spectacle**

All new mediums take time to develop, with many experiments and innovations occurring on the way, some of which are successful and others not. It also takes time for them to be accepted culturally, for a shared public opinion and understanding to develop and for a way to talk about them critically to be honed. This can be said of radio, whose early newspaper coverage in Britain focused less on providing critical reflection on its form and more on its experimental nature, its non-broadcast uses, technical discussions and the sheer aural ‘spectacle’ or at least the wonder of hearing something live through a small box many miles from where it was happening (Briggs 1961: 23–89; Poole 1984: 43). For example, Laurence H. Harding (Wireless Engineer, late of the American Marconi Company) wrote a piece for the *Daily Mail* on 5 February about ‘[...] mysterious signals from the unknown [...] which] are arousing widespread interest’ (1920: 6). Or, where the *Daily Mail* covered Princess Mary’s attendance at a garden fete on 29 June, where it was reported that she listened to music transmitted by wireless from Hammersmith, something which for the modern reader would not be thought of as newsworthy (1921: 5). This technology was new, different and mysterious, it had an aural ‘spectacle’ about it which attracted newspapers to cover such happenings and readers to be interested in reading about it; this is what made it news. Indeed, the *Daily Mail* even became part of the experiments when they helped organize a broadcast by the opera singer Melba in 1920, as the headline read, ‘Melba sings by wireless. Complete success of a “Daily Mail” test’ (Anon. 1920a: 5).

In a similar vein the *Daily Mirror*, in an editorial on 6 July, wrote of its experiments with sending pictures via radio: a form of wireless fax (Anon. 1920b: 5). Almost every paper at

this time highlights and writes about the possibilities of the new technology of wireless communication. Many stories focus on different experiments and uses of radio technology, whether as part of broadcasting or its use as a means of wireless communications. Even when the story focuses on something non-radio-related, if it was collected by wireless or submitted by wireless, this is mentioned in the strapline. Where early radio programmes are covered, it tends to be more in terms of the quality of reception, the mystery of radio, its social impact and the wonder of listening, than in terms of a serious and in-depth critique.

At this time radio coverage was written mostly by journalists and some newly appointed radio or wireless *correspondents* (emphasis added). The radio critic, with the associated cultural kudos that the critic title implies, as a distinct role with a column focusing on the broadcasting organizations and/or their output, was not to appear in the national press until the mid-1920s or even the early 1930s, depending on the paper, though some of the radio journals had started to appoint radio critics by the early 1920s. For example, while *The Guardian* had a piece on 29 December by a wireless correspondent about how to build a home-made set (1923: 4), an interest many papers and journals such as *Popular Wireless* covered in this period before the mass production of radio sets (Briggs 1981: 27–32), there were no pieces by identifiable radio critics. However, by 1925 a regular column called, ‘Wireless notes and weekend programmes’ had appeared, although reviews with bylines were not to appear until 1930. Radio, in this way, was mostly covered in its early days as a form of news, a social concern or as a form of technology. Only as it established itself and started to become more popular would newspapers start to cover it as a form of entertainment and culture; though publications such as *Amateur Wireless* had started to add discussions of programmes to their more technical articles by the early 1920s (e.g. Thermion 1923: 59). The reluctance of the national newspapers to extend their coverage was partly due to the potential competition radio threatened and, paradoxically, the fact it was not yet that well established

(Moseley 1935: 58). However, by the mid-1920s it was obvious that radio was not going to disappear and that the press had to find some way to accommodate it as a popular form of entertainment or to lose readers to those that did. For example, when many of the main newspapers refused to carry the BBC's radio schedule in the early 1920s without payment, they soon had to change their minds when the *Pall Mall Gazette* broke ranks and included such information (Briggs 1961: 142; Moseley 1935: 57).

### **Early critical coverage of broadcasting: Listings and previews**

During the 1920s, as the BBC established its radio service, one of the first forms of regular press coverage, the Listings, was introduced by the national newspapers. This was basic information to let readers know which programmes were on and when. The BBC, after the initial problems with the press refusing to print their schedules, had also launched its own very successful publication the *Radio Times* in 1923 (Briggs 1981: 8–13). Here readers could find out what the BBC was broadcasting along with articles about the 'critical appreciation of radio' (Briggs 1965: 283). Indeed, the *Radio Times*, alongside other publications such as *The Broadcaster*, spent some time reflecting on social issues, such as what it was to be a radio listener, in an attempt to educate the general public on how to appreciate radio (Briggs 1981: 54; Scannell and Cardiff 1991: 360–75).

The listings appearing in the national newspapers, in their earliest form, were limited in scope, often only giving titles of programmes and times of broadcast. Newspapers wanted to provide some information about radio for their readers, but they did not want to give too much publicity to a competitor. The listings information from the start also included European stations, competitors to the BBC, many of which were to become very popular. This was especially true on Sundays, when the BBC's schedule was initially restricted in the number of hours broadcast and its content (Briggs 1965: 25, 227–49). However by the mid-



1930s, as broadcasts from European commercial stations began to attract sizeable British audiences, at least in the south-east, newspaper proprietors became worried about losing advertising revenue and began to side with the BBC and started to limit programme information about these channels in their publications (Briggs 1965: 35–69). Initially listings information was mostly to be found on general news pages with little critical reflection on the output of radio. Their form was similar to the listings provided for theatre plays or films that gave information of the name and time of the performance. However, radio broadcasts were made up of many programmes, broadcast in a daily schedule. The paper was therefore faced with a challenge of finding the best way to present this sort of information in a way the reader could understand without taking up too much space. The solution was to combine the traditional way of providing theatre or film listings, focusing on the showing of a particular programme, with the idea of multiple entries happening over the day.

#### TODAY'S RADIO PROGRAMME

LONDON (369 metres) – 11.30 a.m. – 12.30 p.m., Mr Charles Grant, baritone:

5.30 Mr John Hope Fellows, editor of the 'Locomotive News', on Model

Railways: 7, first news bulletin and weather report [...]. (Anon. 1923: 10, original emphasis)

As one can see, the listings start with information about the channel, its frequency and where it is broadcast, and this is then followed by the individual programmes with their start times. Presented in this way the programmes, the individual texts, are linked together by the supra text or channel's schedule. At this early stage the amount of information provided was not really enough for an informed decision about what the programmes were about or what was worth listening to; indeed, this might be the reason why the sales of the *Radio Times*,

which provided more detailed information, rose over the following decades eventually to make it one of the most popular magazines in Britain (Briggs 1965: 281). Newspapers soon could no longer ignore radio's rising popularity and that of associated journals and magazines like the *Radio Times* and *World Radio*, and so began to expand the information provided within and around the listings; for example, some papers had by the mid-1920s introduced a more critical input with previews.

The radio preview's role is to help guide the readers, informing them of what might be worth listening to that day or in the upcoming week. This form, in many ways, picked up from the way plays at the theatre were previewed at the start of a run, but with the problem that radio programmes at this time were almost always broadcast live and often only performed once. Therefore the previewer had to write the piece, usually, without actually hearing the performance. To do this they had to develop new ways of choosing and writing about radio programmes, such as relying on secondary information provided by the BBC or foreign stations or using any knowledge the writer had of any other work by the artists involved or about the content. For example, *The Listener* of *The Guardian* (Anon. 1930a: 12), when previewing a number of programmes involving the Halle Orchestra, utilized his knowledge of previous broadcasts and live performances by the orchestra and the music to be played. Previews of this time range from offering very basic information, such as identifying those who were appearing in the radio programme, e.g. 'The German radio and gramophone tenor Franz Baumann, will give a song recital on 2 L 0 to-night' (Anon. 1928: 20), to slightly longer pieces providing more information. For example Ariel, who wrote for the *Daily Mirror*, had a regular preview column that appeared next to the radio listings; the two worked together, one gave the information about when programmes were to be broadcast, the other suggested what things to look out for:

With regard to the former, which is to be broadcast at 7.45 p.m., attention is particularly drawn to a member of the cast – Dorothy Dampier. It is said that her voice is unusually deep. In fact, it is described as possessing ‘basso-profondo qualities’. In addition to her songs, she is heard calling ‘Programmes’ at Intervals during the ‘Parade’. (1931: 16)

Such a previewer not only selects programmes they believe are worth listening to but, through their preview, encourages readers to think about what makes a good or interesting programme; thus the critic helps raise the question of judgement and value as part of the public discourse about radio. The previewer tries to convince the reader of their choice and views through the citing of the names of actors and performers, use of radio terms and a general display of their radio knowledge, and by doing so they try to position themselves as the knowing critic able to pass judgement on particular programmes. So here, for example, one member of the cast is highlighted, Dorothy Dampier, who we are told has an unusually deep voice with “‘basso-profondo qualities’”, which is something to listen out for.

These previews provide an insight into the cultural values of the previewer, their cultural dispositions and knowledge and how they view radio as a cultural form. Many of the previewers select programmes that are based on plays they know, that use actors or writers they are familiar with or are about topics that they valued. In this way they tend towards previews of programmes that fit their cultural disposition. Looking through the previews found in the national press at this time, classical recitals, well-known plays and the like were often highlighted, though some would also write about upcoming must-listen-to radio plays and events by those creating a name for themselves in radio, for example, *The Listener* of *The Guardian* highlighted that ‘[l]ight entertainment will be found in a broadcast by Les Allan and his Canadian bachelors’ (Anon. 1930b: 12). Previewers at this time were helping to

frame radio for the public, providing a cultural guide of what was worth listening to. Their existence also, in many ways, emphasized that the important critical focus was to be on the text or programme, rather than on the industry or the schedule. The programmes worthy of being selected for preview were often, at least for the broadsheets, those associated with the dominant cultural values: classical music, traditional theatre plays and the like: values usually held by their readers. However, at least in the more popular newspapers, the programmes being selected also included more popular acts, whether music or comedy, signalling a divide in how the press was to treat radio, as a serious or entertainment form.

### **Critics as reviewers**

Within a few years radio reviewing was added to the existing listings and previews coverage. Indeed, reviews were to become one of the dominant forms of coverage of radio and later, television. Such a form fitted well with the way the arts and the popular mass media were already written about in most newspapers by the 1920s. This was especially true for the quality broadsheets where radio reviewing, as it appeared, was to be found alongside other art reviews. Reviewing also seemed more acceptable to the BBC than coverage of its internal affairs; indeed, many of its producers came to actively court publicity and exposure about their work (Moseley 1935: 65). Reith even welcomed a new weekly feature in radio criticism by the *Daily Herald* in 1931 by saying that it was, '[...] warmly welcomed at Savoy Hill' (Reith, cited in Briggs 1981: 158); though Reith often dismissed wider issues raised by critics, such as the lack of entertainment on the BBC (Scannell and Cardiff 1991: 225).

By the early 1930s most papers had regular columns reviewing selected output of the BBC and other radio stations emanating from Europe, though most of the coverage focused on the output of the BBC, the only British broadcasting organization at this time. However, this coverage was often limited in size and, for some of the more popular papers, was located not

on review pages but in dedicated entertainment sections or on new radio pages. Here radio previews, reviews and listings material would often sit side by side, often with other articles about radio. For example, the *Daily Mirror* had such a page by the early 1930s where radio reviews and previews by Ariel sat alongside listings information. It is at this stage that we start to see the division which was later replicated in television coverage, where broadsheets, at least initially, sought to cover radio in a similar way to theatre and film, helping its claim to be a cultural form worthy of serious critique, while popular newspapers treated it more as mass medium to be placed on existing entertainment pages or one requiring its own pages within the paper (Rixon 2011: 53–54, 137–42).

While the preview helped guide readers in what to watch, the review played the function of critically reflecting on the value and worth of a programme after its broadcast, thus allowing and aiding a public debate about the quality and/or success of the programme. The critics or writers of such reviews were by the early 1930s often identified, though not always with their real or full names, e.g. H.J.H. provided reviews for *The Guardian* while another critic wrote previews under the moniker *The Listener*, seemingly trying to position themselves as a listener. Indeed, at times it is even shortened to ‘Listener’. As noted earlier, radio reviews took a form similar to other forms of reviewing. They were published post the event, which was broadcast live, though some programmes were performed twice in a week. The reviews mostly focused on the performances of actors and the form and content of the programmes and the impression they made on the reviewer, a similar approach to that taken by many critics writing about other cultural areas (Pool 1984: 48). Radio reviewers were utilizing a similar set of values and tools developed by and found in literature, drama and film reviewing, partly as this was a form they, the editors and the public understood. Though, as we shall see, critics had to and wanted to adapt such techniques for this aural medium.

For example, the *Daily Express*'s critic in the 1930s, Archie de Bear (A de B), uses a style of writing about radio which, while similar to the way theatre critics would review a play, makes some adaptations for this different medium. So, in this example, he writes of the performance of the radio presenter or radio actor in a way which is similar to how a theatre critic might write about a stage actor: 'The principals, too, including Mr. Chariot himself, seemed to have gained considerably in confidence and spontaneity and that vital quality which is called "attack"' (de Bear 1933: 11). However, while a theatre reviewer might mention the ability of an actor to project, this radio critic mentions the way this actor 'treated the microphone as an old friend', echoing the view that the techniques of stage and radio are different (Gielgud 1947: 83–84). As *The Times* correspondent noted:

The development of wireless play writing technique may well lead up to a form which is very far removed from what is usually understood by the word 'drama' [... in] the ordinary theatre the audience is able to see and to hear. [...] But sign of the actors and scenery is denied the audience of the wireless play, and the plot can be developed by means of sounds only. The producer has to broadcast his 'scenery' and his atmosphere by translating them into sounds, the listener, subconsciously if the producer has done his work well, translating the sounds back and in his imagination recreating the scene conceived by the producer.

(Anon. 1925: 7)

While such radio reviews, in a similar way to other forms of reviewing, focus on the text and performance, on trying to judge the quality of the radio programme, the writing, the acting the script and the like, they had to also start to take account of the radio's aural form, its

lack of visuals, difference performance techniques and its intimate nature (Gielgud 1947: 83–84; Shingler and Wieringa 1998: 73–93, 114–17).

Another example of this synthesis can be seen with a review by H.J.H.:

Dodd relates his hand in the affair [using a...] device [which ...] is similar to the ‘flash back’ employed by the kinema [...] It is very effective. The book is condensed into a series of highly dramatic scenes [...] [t]he production was swift and unhesitating; the sound-effects discreetly realistic. The lines were spoken well, though the accent of American characters occasionally suffered a relapse. (1930: 10)

What is interesting about this example is the use of another art or medium with which to compare radio, such as where he mentions kinema [*sic*] and its use of flashback and where he writes about radio in a similar way to a play, being ‘condensed into a series of highly dramatic scenes’. However, at other moments he writes more about the specific aural nature of radio, such as with the mention about the realistic use of sound effects. It shows how critics at this time were taking existing approaches and a value system they knew about, an impressionistic textual focused criticism, and combining this with new devices to critique this emerging medium.

The type of reviewing that appears from the 1920s is similar to that found for other cultural forms such as theatre, music and book reviews. This is a form the critics understood and one that allowed them to write about radio in a way which gave it and themselves credibility. Here was another form of popular culture that could be valued in a similar way; one that could be reviewed and written about in relation to the text and performance. Indeed, it was a medium that was worthy enough to warrant a review and a critic to critique it.

However, unlike film and theatre, the public had regular access to radio. Therefore, while film critics would often review a film not yet seen by the public, helping to inform them whether it was worth seeing or not, the radio critic had to accept that many listeners would have heard the programme along with them. Therefore their role was less about critically informing the public than attempting to summarize the collective thought about the programme (Barrington 1948: 183). Also radio, unlike other forms of media, placed its texts within a larger supra text or schedule, which was consumed at home. Therefore the radio critic's role was different from other critics'; this was a new medium that was produced, distributed and consumed in a new way.

### **Critics as columnists**

Beyond the more traditional text-focused previews and reviews explored above, some critics began to produce a different type of coverage, one that combined the textual focus of the reviews and previews along with a more critical journalistic interest. Often written in the style of a columnist, they wrote not just about what programmes were being broadcast but about the organization that was producing them. They wrote about the BBC: its funding, organization, personnel and government policy (LeMahieu 1988: 229, 274). Unlike the usual news coverage of radio, they linked their discussions of the workings of the industry with an understanding of its role as a new cultural industry, one that created a popular national cultural service. In some ways they were pioneers who had been given a wide brief and were using different ways of covering this new emerging medium.

Critics such as Collie Knox, writing for the *Daily Express* and then the *Daily Mail*, often wrote regularly about the problems of the BBC, criticizing its funding, pensions, appointments and pay, as well as its output in terms of the schedule and the programmes on offer. His style, as with some other critics, combined that of a reporter, writing about what



was happening in the broadcasting industry, with that of a columnist, writing in a more personal and entertaining way, and that of a traditional critic, focusing on it as a cultural form. As the *Daily Mail* book critic Douglas West wrote,

They read him first because he wrote about a subject which almost everyone has strong views [radio]: because he was well informed, because he put things attractively, because his style was delightfully informal and individual, because he was amusing, because there was no nonsense about him, because he was never afraid to tilt at the **BBC** – at one time a preternaturally solemn body. (1937: vi)

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Such critics were not therefore just interested in the merits of the programme but also the monopoly system created to produce the service, one that many newspapers were, and some still are, critical about.

The contextual writing on radio noted here, often appearing on entertainment pages of popular papers such as that of the *Daily Express*, had to balance up its need to entertain, to support the listings information with some background on the programmes, along with the critic's wish to provide some critical reflection on broadcasting and the BBC as a whole. For example, Collie Knox, in the *Daily Express* on 4 October, wrote about the lack of light music on the BBC's Sunday service, something which he agitated about for a number of years (1932: 13); Jonah Barrington, a contemporary of Collie Knox, wrote in the same paper on 8 November about the costs of putting variety on radio (1935: 23); and the *Daily Mirror*'s Wireless correspondent asked why the BBC continued to provide its usual Sabbath coverage when Christmas fell on a Sunday as it would in 1932: 'why the BBC finds it necessary to make so little other variation from a normal Sunday's programme is difficult to understand' (1932: 7).

While this was a form that was later found in television coverage, over time the review or preview form has tended to be the dominant forms of writing about broadcasting, perhaps as these fitted well with the way different media and cultural forms have been accepted by the existing dominant culture with its fixation on artists and texts. But it might also be that the review and preview forms were popular with readers, and even broadcasters, as they framed the public debate about radio and television in a way they understood. While for Poole (1984) the problems of television criticism lay mostly with the television critics who failed to distance themselves from the dominant literature culture to create a more suitable form of criticism, one could argue that the problem, if there was one, lay with the way most radio critics were employed to write about radio and how this set the precedent for television.

## **Conclusion**

As I have argued, radio or wireless as the British press initially tended to refer to it, was written about in newspapers and journals since the first experiments began with this new technology. This initial coverage tended to mostly be in the form of general news, often focused on technical developments and social concerns and the aural 'spectacle' of listening to sound over the ether. It was only as radio developed as a broadcast medium and became popular that newspapers saw a need and an advantage in providing more dedicated and detailed coverage, a form of coverage that began to shape the public's acceptance of radio as a form of popular culture. However, the appointment of radio critics, the form their coverage took, and the cultural position of radio as something worthy of critique, took time to establish. As coverage appeared it tended to follow the form provided for film and theatre, to fixate mostly on programmes as texts critiqued in an impressionistic style. Therefore, much of the initial coverage for radio was in the form of listings, previews and reviews. These let the readers know when programmes were on, which ones were worth listening to and what

the critic thought about them in a form the reader could understand. Further, there was a division between the more popular coverage of papers like the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Express*, which treated radio more like a form of entertainment media, and that of the quality papers, such as *The Guardian*, which sought to treat radio like another art form, mirroring, in some ways, the different ends of the cultural hierarchy.

However, this did not mean that radio critics took wholesale from existing critical approaches; they understood that they were not dealing with a form completely the same as theatre or film and that this was an aural medium that came into people's homes. As radio was listened to by millions of people, often for many hours a day, who would also read the radio columns, previews and reviews, the radio critic had, at least in the popular newspapers, to engage with this aware audience in an entertaining style. This was not an elitist art form that only the critic and a minority of the public would experience. Radio critics had to find a way of approaching radio in a similar way to Eagleton's critics of the nineteenth century, in a style and form that was acceptable to the public, newspapers, broadcasters and the cultural elites. They could only build a consensus, a shared understanding, if they could convince these groups that what they were saying had credibility. And this they did by a synthesis of existing approaches which they adapted to this new medium. Such critics had to work out what radio was and to find a way to write about it. As Crozier writing in the 1950s notes,

Radio and television critics have found several things peculiar to their work.

Radio plays and features were a new 'art' altogether, and therefore some standards of criticism had to be evolved [...] there was no yardstick and there were no precedents. So radio critics have had to carve out an idea of what radio is doing, how it does it, and what more it might do. (1958: 201–02)

However, alongside the more standard forms of reviews and previews, which seemed to suppress or ignore the mass media nature of radio, a more contextual form of coverage developed. This not only offered a critique of what was made and broadcast but reflected on the organizations and industry which produced such programmes. It took account of the wider context in which policy, management decisions and the like took a role in the way radio was developing. And while previewing and reviewing were to become the more popular type of coverage for radio and later television, this contextual form offered a different discourse about radio, one which provided an understanding of how it worked as a mass medium. It was a form that combined reviews and previews with a more journalistic-critical approach delivered in a columnist style, leading to an entertaining and popular form of coverage.

Newspaper radio critics were never all-powerful, they could never dictate people's views, but they were important in establishing ways to reflect on and to talk about radio. They were an important voice in the mediated public sphere and provided a shared framework for valuing radio. The coverage they provided was important in how radio came to be perceived, accepted and how debates appeared about its development. With some exceptions, they helped encourage a focus on the programme as a text to which existing values of culture were applied. However, as I have shown, another more contextual approach was also evident at this time, though it was never as popular as reviews or previews. The way radio was written about was also, in many ways, important in how television became covered by newspapers from the 1950s: it was another form of broadcasting, which was initially mostly live and was broadcast in linear schedules. Also, many of the radio critics came to extend their coverage to the new medium of television as it took off, such as Mary Crozier. Therefore, to develop a better appreciation of how radio, and later television, becomes accepted as part of popular

culture requires an understanding of the way it was written about and positioned culturally by the press.

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**Comment [K2]:** Please supply the initials/first name for the author. When you do this please follow the following format exactly, including connecting punctuation: Ariel, x. x. (1931), 'To-day best for listener', *Daily Mirror*, 1 May, p. 16. This is the moniker of the critic under which he published. I cannot find his/ her real name. My suggestion is to leave it like this, as this is what they called themselves in the newspaper

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